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Fracking Company: EPA Decision to Test Contaminated Wells in Dimock "Undercuts" Obama's Commitment to Natural Gas

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by: Mike Ludwig, Truthout | Report

President Obama proclaimed his support for safely expanding gas and oil drilling on public lands this week, and the announcement received an uncomfortable applause from a fracking company ensnarled in a ongoing controversy over poisoned water wells used by dozens of families in rural Pennsylvania.

The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) announced last week its plans to sample and test water from 60 homes near Dimock, Pennsylvania, to determine if residents are "being exposed to hazardous substances." Cabot Oil and Gas, a company that was fined \$120,000 in 2009 for fracking mishaps and contaminating water in the area, sent a letter to EPA administrator Lisa Jackson on Wednesday complaining that the water testing "undercut the president's commitment to this important resource."

Victims of contaminated water have sued Cabot and fought for more than two years for clean water, and, until about two months ago, Cabot was under state orders to deliver fresh water in giant vessels to several of the affected residences. State officials ruled in early December that Cabot could stop making water deliveries, prompting activists, Gasland director Josh Fox and actor Mark Ruffalo to deliver fresh water in a recent media blitz.

There is a moratorium on fracking in the area, but resident Craig Sautner, who leased his gas rights to Cabot a few years ago and has since become an anti-fracking activist, said his well water is still discolored and contaminated. In December, Sautner told Truthout the gritty details of a struggle that has consumed his life.

"I don't want to use that water again," Sautner said about his well, which was first contaminated with methane in 2009. "My daughter said it best. She said, she told my wife after the fact, 'Mom, I don't want to go back on that contaminated well again ... I don't want to get sick again. I don't want to get all these hives and rashes. And besides that, I want to have kids someday.'"

Now the EPA, which is testing water samples as a result of a direct request from residents, is delivering fresh water to the Sautners and a handful of other families.

Obama Calls for Safe Fracking

In his State of the Union address, President Obama said America should safely expand natural gas drilling and create 600,000 jobs in the process. In a speech in Las Vegas on Thursday, Obama made a vague reference to expanding controversial fracking drilling operations with new federal rules to prevent environmental harm.

"Some of you may not have been following this, but because of new technologies, because we can now access natural gas that we couldn't access before in an economic way, we've got a supply of natural gas under our feet that can last America nearly a hundred years," Obama said.

Obama said drilling must be done carefully, and announced new rules that would require fracking operators drilling on public lands to disclose the chemicals they pump in the ground.

Fracking is short for hydraulic fracturing, a rapidly expanding and largely unregulated - at least at the federal level - natural-gas drilling technique that involves injecting water and chemicals deep underground to break up rock and release natural gas. The practice has been linked to water contamination and earthquakes across the country, and several wells have blown out in recent years.

For some environmentalists, Obama's announcement is a blessing and a curse. Many are opposed to fracking in general, but activists have been fighting for years to force gas companies to disclose the ingredients in fracking liquids, and the new rules proposed by the president could be a signal of more federal regulation to come.

Cabot Jumps on Obama's Statements

After Obama's State of the Union address, Cabot CEO Dan Dinges wrote to Jackson complaining that the EPA's decision to determine if Dimock residents are still being exposed to poisonous water sends the wrong message about fracking and could compromise the Obama administration's priorities.

"The president made a strong call to all Americans last night to take advantage of these new opportunities in shale gas development," Dinges wrote. "To prevent uncertainty and take advantage of the new opportunities, in our view, what is needed is an objective approach to dealing with community concerns - something missing in recent EPA actions."

EPA spokesperson Terri White said the agency is just doing its job.

"In his State of the Union address, President Obama made clear that he is committed to tapping America's natural gas as part of a new era in American energy," White told Truthout in a statement. "He also affirmed our commitment to 'developing this resource without putting the health and safety of our citizens at risk.'"

White said the EPA does not hesitate to take action when Americans' health could be at risk.

"Our priority is the health of the people there, and our actions are guided entirely by science and the law," White said. "We are providing water to a handful of households because data developed by Cabot itself provides evidence that they are being exposed to hazardous substances at levels of health concern."

The EPA decided to test the water wells after reviewing data submitted by state officials, Cabot and Dimock residents. White said the samples collected at the residences will be reviewed under the highest scientific standards, and data provided by Cabot and state officials will be taken into account in the final review, which is due out in about seven weeks.

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